

# Museum Basics

**RESEARCHER:** Caleb Oduol

**TOPIC:** Museum Basics (Introduction to Museums)

**THEME:** Museology

**DEPARTMENT:** Education



*One of the central displays in Nairobi National Museum's Cycles of Life Gallery*  
Source: NMK

## Lesson Objectives

1. To define a museum and related terminologies.
2. To discuss the functions of museums.
3. To explore types of museums.
4. To highlight the role of museums to society.

## Learning resources

1. Text
2. Video
3. Photo

## Defining Museums

Museums have been defined in different ways in publications and other reference books, including dictionaries. Organisations such as the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have also given definitions of a museum.

According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM):

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability.

They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”

ICOM is a membership association and a non-governmental organisation which establishes professional and ethical standards for museum activities.



*ICOM Logo*  
Source: ICOM

## **Museum terminologies**

There are terms that are associated with museums and their activities. Some of the common terms include:

**Artefact:** This is an object of cultural or historical interest, made or given shape by humans, such as a tool or a work of art.

**Antiquity:** These are things such as buildings, statues, or coins that were made in ancient times and have survived to the present day.

According to the National Museums of Kenya Heritage Act, 2006, an antiquity “means any movable object other than a book or document made in or imported into Kenya before the year 1895, or any human, faunal or floral remains of similar minimum age which may exist in Kenya”.

**Museum object:** This means an object that is typically movable; and is eligible to be, or is made part of, a museum collection through a formal procedure, such as accessioning.

**Museum collection:** This means natural or cultural object(s) and/or intellectual property directly owned by the museum as a public trust, and registered as part of its permanent collection, to be used for the exclusive purposes of preservation, research and presentation to the public.

**Exhibit:** This is an object or a group of items shown publicly in a museum.

**Exhibition:** This is a comprehensive grouping of all elements (including exhibits and displays) that form a complete public presentation of collections and information for public use.

Exhibitions use a combination of objects, text, graphics, interactives, and/or props to create a physical space dedicated to the exploration of specific themes, messages, and ideas.

**Curator:** This is a person who manages a museum, museum collection or exhibition.



## **Classification of heritage**

Heritage is defined as that which is inherited from past generations, maintained in the present, and bestowed to future generations. Our heritage is a part of us and is all around us. Knowledge of the past makes us understand the present. It is central to how we see our identity as individuals, communities and a nation. There are two major categories of heritage: cultural and natural heritage.

Cultural Heritage is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community. They are passed on from generation to generation. Cultural heritage includes customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values, and is often expressed as either intangible or tangible cultural heritage and movable or immovable cultural heritage. Examples of cultural heritage include: arts, music, dance, monuments, historical buildings and material culture such as food, containers, costumes and ornaments.

Natural heritage refers to the sum total of the elements of biodiversity, including flora and fauna and ecosystem types, together with associated geological structures and formations also known as geo-diversity. Examples of natural heritage include: plants, landscapes, rivers, forests, natural falls, caves and animals.

## Functions of a museum

Museums perform the following basic functions:

**Collection:** This is the acquisition of objects from their primary sources to the museum. Museums acquire objects in several ways; field collection is most commonly used. Other methods of acquisition include purchase, donations and research activity such as excavation.

**Documentation:** This involves recording and keeping information about the acquired object in an object register or catalogue. As soon as objects are received, the data, the source, the method of acquisition and other available information are duly recorded.

**Preservation:** Museum collections must be put in conditions that check deterioration. The collections must also be protected from damages.

**Research:** Museums extract as much knowledge as possible from the collections. Many museums publish scholarly articles, journals and books to make available the result of research on their collections.

**Exhibition:** Information generated from collections and research is displayed to the public to raise awareness and learning. The exhibition approach and technique choice depends largely on the purpose.

## Types of museums

Museums are broadly categorised as history, art, and science museums. There are different types of museums, each with their own focus or specialty such as fine arts, craft, history, science, technology, children's museums, natural history, botanical and zoological gardens.

**Art Museums (Art Galleries):** These are spaces for displaying art objects, most commonly visual art objects such as paintings, sculptures, photography, illustrations, drawings, ceramics, or metalwork. Examples include: Louvre Museum in Paris, France, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and Nairobi Gallery in Nairobi Kenya.



*Point Zero Gallery at Nairobi Gallery  
Source: Nairobi Gallery*



**Maritime Museums:** These are specialised museums for displaying maritime history, culture, or archaeology. Maritime archaeological museums exhibit artefacts and preserved shipwrecks recovered from bodies of water. Maritime history museums show and educate the public about humanity's maritime past. Examples include: National Maritime Museum Cornwall, United Kingdom and San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park.

**Military and War Museums:** These museums specialise in military histories organised from the point of view of one nation and conflicts in which that country has taken part. They collect and present exhibits such as weapons, uniforms, decorations and war technology (military equipment). Examples include: Imperial War Museum in London, National WWI Museum and Memorial, Kansas City, Missouri and Museum of Military History, Vienna, Austria.

**Science & Technology Museums:** They are specialised in science and the history of science. The displays are made to allow the visitors to engage with. This allows them to effectively learn about the different branches of science. Exhibits may include topics such as computers, aviation, astronomy and the animal kingdom. Examples include: American Museum of Natural History, Adler Planetarium, Chicago, MUSE-The Science Museum of Trento and The Natural History Museum, Berlin.

**Children's Museums:** A museum intended exclusively for young children, with everything scaled to their physical size and mental capacity. Examples include: The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, Indiana, US, Boston Children's Museum in Boston and Brooklyn Children's Museum in New York City.

**History Museums:** They collect objects and artefacts that tell a chronological story about the locality. Collected objects could include documents, artefacts and archaeological findings in a building, a historic house, or a historic site. Examples include: Fort Jesus Museum in Mombasa, Kenya, Hyrax Hill Museum in Nakuru Kenya, Karen Blixen Museum in Nairobi, Kenya, British Museum and Egyptian Museum.



*Front view of Karen Blixen Museum  
Source: Karen Blixen Museum*

**Natural History Museums:** Such museums display objects from nature such as stuffed animals or pressed plants. Examples include: Nairobi National Museum in Kenya, Kisumu Museum in Kenya and American Museum of Natural History.



*Centrepiece at the Kisumu Museum  
Source: Karen Blixen Museum*

## **History of the National Museums of Kenya**

National Museums of Kenya (NMK) is a state corporation established by an Act of Parliament, the Museums and Heritage Act 2006. NMK is a multi-disciplinary institution whose role is to collect, preserve, study, document and present Kenya's past and present cultural and natural heritage. NMK also manages many Regional Museums, Sites and Monuments of national and international importance alongside priceless collections of Kenya's living cultural and natural heritage.

The history of the institution dates back to 1910 when a museum was established in Nairobi by the then East Africa and Uganda Natural History Society [currently the East African Natural History Society (EANHS)]. The group consisted mainly of colonial settlers and naturalists who needed a place to keep and preserve their collections of various specimens. Its first site was at the present Nyayo House. The site soon became small and a larger building was put up in 1922 where the Nairobi Serena Hotel stands.

In 1929, the colonial government set aside land at the Museum Hill and construction work started at the current site. It was officially opened on 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 1930 and named

Coryndon Museum. This was in honour of Sir Robert Coryndon, one-time Governor of Kenya and a staunch supporter of Uganda Natural History Society. On attainment of independence in 1963, it was re-named NMK. Since the 1960s, NMK has expanded its services and assets to include Regional Museums, Sites and Monuments across the country. This includes museums such as Karen Blixen, Fort Jesus, Gede , Malindi, Kisumu and Kapenguria; sites such as, Olorgesailie, Kariandusi, Fort Ternan and monuments such as Vasco da Gama Pillar, Fort Jesus and Nyayo.



## **Role of the museums to the society**

Museums play a vital role in the cultural and educational life of society through the interpretation of museum collections, preservation of antiquities and promotion of historical, cultural and natural heritage. Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment.

1. Museums, which are centres for conservation, study and reflection on heritage, today are involved directly or indirectly in trying to offer solutions to the major issues of our time through conservation and research activities and dissemination of knowledge to the public through among others, exhibitions and interactive public programmes.
2. Modern trends in museology have broadened the range of subject matter and introduced many interactive exhibits. These types of exhibits give the public the opportunity to make choices and engage in activities that may vary the experience from person to person.
3. Museums are considered as places that offer a platform for putting ideas into context. The public therefore learns from the past to enable them to understand the present and the future. This has enabled people to formulate their own views on given issues.

4. Museums have offered employment and training to many people in different disciplines for example research and training in indigenous knowledge and alternative economic empowerment to communities.
5. Museums as social activists: Museums combine the museum's educational, reflective and contextual role with social responsibility. Museums present the reality or truth of the cultural viewpoints and in so doing, they can bring change.